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# 'All kinds of music for all kinds of people'

## Les FrancoFolies celebrate both francophone music and the festival itself, which is marking its 20th year

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SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

JOHN MAHONEY GAZETTE FILE PHOTO
As musical programmer, Laurent Saulnier spent last winter listening to CDs by the desk full in his office.

When Les FrancoFolies de Montréal held its first edition – some 15 shows in October 1989 – the local music scene was in a rut, far from the glories carved out by Robert Charlebois, Beau Dommage, Harmonium et al in the 1970s. It seemed that all you heard on the radio were pale imitations of American product formula and safe-as-milk middle-of-the-road fare, as if alternative music had somehow bypassed Quebec. Consuming home-grown music wasn't exactly cool. The idea of starting a festival devoted to French-language music seemed out of sync with realities on the street.

Laurent Saulnier doesn't see it that way. He's experienced every single edition of what has become Montreal's second largest festival (after the Montreal International Jazz Festival), 11 years as a journalist and nine as the chief programmer of the Francos. The festival's 250 shows, including 175 free, make it the world's largest gathering of francophone musicians (including, this year for the first time, a group from the Yukon, Soir de Semaine). From its beginnings, Saulnier saw the seeds of what is now a boom in original music from Quebec and "la scène locale."

"Already in 1989, we were seeing a new kind of singer. Michel Rivard had just brought out Un trou dans les nuages, at a time when he enjoyed the most popularity of his career, outside of Beau Dommage. Same thing for Richard Séguin, who had just released Double-vie. Marjo had released her first solo disc, and Jean Leloup his very first album. Les Colocs were beginning to make waves, as was Richard Desjardins. So there was already a solid base from which to build.

"The importance of the Francos is divided between the first 10 years and the last decade. The last 10 years we've been in total symbiosis with the scene. Certainly we can't take all the credit for what's happened on the local scene over the last few years. It takes a lot of input from all sorts of sectors to create a buzz. The Francos were there, but at the same time so was Musique Plus, certain community radio stations were there, as were certain newspapers and blogs. It was the blend of all these elements that made the scene what it is today."

But Les FrancoFolies are more than "la cerise sur le sundae" or even a symbol of the vibrancy and difference of francophone music holding its own in a sea of Anglo-American fare. As a festival, it's always been a bazaar for discovery and, more than that, one-time-only special events that make it much more than a collection of acts going through the motions of a tour.

In addition to a strong contingent of European stars (Véronique Sanson, Michel Fugain, Benjamin Biolay) and alternative acts (Camille, Arman Méliès, Pauline Croze, Déportivo, Ami Karim), as well as world music notables Amadou et Mariam and Tiken Jah Fakoly, the festival is a virtual who's who of established and up-and-coming Québécois artists, many performing in formats they normally wouldn't appear in. This mainly takes the form of homage (the closing-night tribute to Quebec's seminal chansonnier Félix Leclerc, whose death 20 years ago will be commemorated by no less than 18 music and stage personalities), guest duets (French star Michel Fugain's Carte Blanche tomorrow night) and special repertoire (Gregory Charles taking on 100 francophone classic songs, from the 1950s to 90s, decade by decade, from next Monday to Friday) and format (young superstar Pierre Lapointe re-inventing the art of stagecraft in a production called Mutantès at Salle Wilfrid-Pelletier next Thursday through Saturday).

The main drawing card is that these are one-time-only events with a you-were-there pull. There is no greater example than the two closing night blowouts: the pairing of Quebec's two most interesting progressive rock bands, Malajube (premiering new songs) and Karkwa (in its first local show since the release of the widely praised Le volume du vent) along with hip-hop-rocking Gatineau and newcomer Alexandre Désilets; and veteran diva Diane Dufresne presenting a cautionary tableau on the environment of a troubled planet, accompanied by such diverse singers as environmentalist-singer Richard Desjardins and rocker Michel Pagliaro.

As Saulnier mentions, closing night "represents the basic idea behind Les Francos, that is, all kinds of music for all kinds of people. That means that just because you're 60, you have a right to see Malajube, and that because you're 14, you have a right to see Diane Dufresne. There's no age limit."

This is Saulnier's first FrancoFolies in which the programming sought to provide a perspective on the event itself. "As it's the 20th anniversary, it was important to have a certain equilibrium between acts who haven't played the festival in a long time and the young acts that represent the here-and-now, pushing for their own place in the firmament. On the outdoor stages, we wanted to have the 'return' of certain acts, like Zébulon, Les Frères à Ch'val, Les B.B., not acts that were particularly important to the history of the Francos but were nonetheless part of the history of popular music in Quebec. Just to give a little glimpse of what came before, in addition to the rising acts." And, as Michel Rivard appeared in the very first edition and most of the others to follow, he's appearing on numerous programs in addition to his free outdoor show with the Montreal Symphony Orchestra on Monday.

Although they enjoy nominal links, there are few similarities between the Montreal version of the FrancoFolies and the European editions in La Rochelle, France, and Spa, Belgium. "First off, 75 per cent of our shows are free of charge, while over there virtually all are ticketed. The other main thing is that here the Francos are presented in the context of a big city, while La Rochelle is a small town and Spa is minuscule. The atmosphere here makes all the difference in the world."

Thus the European stars love playing here, in the metropolis of Quebec, perhaps the only place in North America where they're fully appreciated. The problem is getting them here; it's holiday season in France and tours are over. "On the other hand," says Saulnier, "the artists who do come over tend to spend a few extra days here relaxing and making contacts. A lot of professional meetings occur under these circumstances. It was due to the Francos that Pierre Lapointe found a French agent. And it was due to the Francos that Diane Tell, who's lived in Europe for 20 years, found a Québécois agent."

As much as the Francos represent the ultimate in exposure for Québécois acts, the festival is a foothold on America for Europeans. "The only problem is the difference in their popularity in France and here. Benjamin Biolay is a good example. He can play La Cigale in Paris, with a capacity of 1,000, three nights in a row. He comes here and plays Club Soda, with a seated capacity of 500. It takes something for them to start at zero, if you will, when coming to Montreal." That's why European acts playing the Hip Rap Rock series at the Cabaret play a free outdoor show beforehand, to stimulate a buzz.

Ask Saulnier for a list of favourite Francos shows over the years, and he scratches his head and says "Ouf!" Then the names start pouring out. "The two nights of Carte Blanche that Alain Bashung did in 2005, with Christophe, Diane Dufresne, Robert Charlebois, Yann Perreau, Daniel Darc ... Yann Perreau, who we took a chance on playing the main stage in 2003 and who performed through a driving rain, introducing his second set with 'Bonsoir, you warriors!' because the remaining people used their plastic raincoats and umbrellas like armour ... M for two nights at the Spectrum: What a blast! The first time we did a residence with Arthur H at Club Soda in 2001, the night we reunited his first trio who hadn't played together in over a decade. The first show here by Amadou et Mariam, wow!

"I can't even tell you how many magic moments I've enjoyed with Pierre Lapointe. Last year's outdoor show with the Orchestre Metropolitain ... even when he did a few nights at the small hall at the Monument National, one knew that this guy was going to go really far. I think that this year he's going to change the way audiences see a show."

As they say in French, à suivre ...

> **"It is important to have an equilibrium between acts who haven't played in a long time and the young acts that represent the here-and-now."**
> Laurent Saulnier, chief programmer of Les FrancoFolies

**Les FrancoFolies de Montréal** continues through Aug. 3 at various locations around Place des Arts, Club Soda, Cabaret Juste Pour Rire and Metropolis. For more information call Info-Francos at 514-876-8989 or 1-888-444-9114 or visit francofolies.com.

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## 20 for the 20th FrancoFolies

Twenty recommended shows, all outdoors, all free. Locales: L'Espace Ford, Ste. Catherine St. at Jeanne-Mance; La Zone Molson Dry, Ste. Catherine St. at Clark; Le Monde Francofou Lait, Complexe Desjardins entrance; L'Espace Vert Desjardins, Place des Arts esplanade; Le Monde Multiculturel Hydro-Québec, Ste Catherine St. at Clark; Place Loto-Québec, St. Urbain St. at de Maisonneuve; Le Monde Urbain Vidéotron, Place des Arts esplanade.

PETER J. THOMPSON NATIONAL POST
Gregory Charles will play 100 classics over five nights.

COURTESY OF FRANCOFOLIES 2008
Punk-metal Vulgaires Machins share their social conscience.

COURTESY OF FRANCOFOLIES 2008
Michel Rivard collaborates with the MSO.

**Geneviève et Matthieu:** Madcap duo exuding Rouyn-Noranda soul (i.e. salty outsider wisdom) from Rouge-gorge album. (Today at 5, L'Espace vert Desjardins)

**Damien Robitaille:** Ontarian with charming accent seduces by nailing life's absurd oddments. (Tonight at 8 and 10, Le Monde Francofou le Lait)

**Kulcha Connection Sound System:** Dancehall reggae in French, with Jamaican and creole accents (Tonight at 10, Le Monde Urbaine Vidéotron)

**Vulgaires Machins:** Punk-metal with heavy social conscience, coming off triumphal album Compter les corps. (Tonight at 10, Zone Molson Dry)

**Tifane:** Créole soul from a sensual Haitian beauty. (Tomorrow, 7 and 9 p.m., Monday, 7 p.m. Le Monde multicultural Hydro-Québec)

**Hello Postier:** Three bassists and a drummer, from the Dears, Breastfeeders, Plaster and Dumas bands, must be heard to be believed! (Tomorrow, 9 p.m., Place Loto-Québec)

**Xavier Caféïne:** Surreal, witty lyricism meets punk attitude with showmanship galore. (Tomorrow, 9 and 11 p.m., L'Espace Ford)

**GrimSkunk:** Legendary metal-punk-prog band brings humour and intelligence to so-called language barriers. (Tomorrow, 10 p.m., Zone Molson Dry)

**Michel Rivard with Montreal Symphony Orchestra:** Sympathetic singer-songwriter icon brings adventurous orchestral arrangements. (Monday, July 28, 9 p.m., L'Espace Ford)

**Alfa Rococo:** Light, jaunty and oh-so crafty tunes by duo that gives pop-rock a good name. (Monday, July 28, 10 p.m., Zone Molson Dry)

**WD-40:** Premiere of film Né pour être sauvage, l'histoire trouble de WD-40, followed by show from the psycho-country-rockers (Tuesday, July 29, 8:30 p.m., Pavillon Air Transat, de Maisonneuve Blvd. at Bleury)

**Philippe B.:** Cohort of Pierre Lapointe presents folk-rock with a sophisticated observant edge. (Wednesday, July 30, 7 p.m., L'Espace Vert Desjardins)

**Paul Kunigis:** World-music ambassador celebrates his 10th year on local scene by inviting world music friends. (Wednesday, July 30, 9 and 11 p.m., L'Espace Ford)

**Pauline Croze:** Sensitive yet strong French chanteuse from the nouvelle vague. (Thursday, July 31, 7 p.m., Place Loto-Québec)

**Vincent Vallières:** No-nonsense country-rock reveries are featured in the finale of tour spotlighting 2006 album La Repère tranquille. (Thursday, July 31, 9 and 11 p.m., L'Espace Ford)

**Bonjour Brumaire:** Buoyant new band with a young following in biggest show since its debut album release. (Friday, Aug. 1, 10 p.m., Zone Molson Dry)

**Urbain Desbois:** Finding poetic drolleries in everyday existence puts him among the funniest, and most touching, singers. (Saturday, Aug. 2, 7 p.m., L'Espace Vert Desjardins)

**Gregory Charles:** After five-night run covering 100 francophone classics, Monsieur Versatilité leads a dance party of soul and groove en français. (Saturday, Aug. 2, 9 p.m., L'Espace Ford)

**Malajube, Karkwa, Gatineau, Alexandre Désilets:** The two hottest (and most ambitious) bands of the moment headline this event reflecting the vitality of the Quebec rock scene. (Sunday, Aug. 3, 6 p.m., Le Zone Molson Dry)

**Diane Dufresne:** Quebec's eternal rock diva presents Terre Planète Bleue, an environmental catharsis accompanied by Richard Séguin, Richard Desjardins, Michel Pagliaro, Daniel Lavoie and more. (Sunday, Aug. 3, 9 p.m., L'Espace Ford)

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